

“Coaches Can Help”: Community Approaches to Serving Four Year Old Children in Wisconsin

Wisconsin has recently embarked on an exciting early childhood initiative and there is now an additional level of support now available to schools and communities. Community Collaboration Coaches have been contracted for each of the Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners Networking Regions and Milwaukee. These Coaches are available support the exploration of community approaches to services for young children. There a special focus on services to four-year-old children and promotion of model early learning standards. This project is possible through a unique blending of funds from the Trust for Early Education, Department of Public Instruction, Department of Workforce Development, and the Department of Health and Family Services.

Historically, the care and the education of young children have operated as separate entities in most communities. This separation results in a disjointed patchwork of services that include child care, Head Start, school, special education, health, parent education, mental health, and varied other systems of services. At best, the fragmented system is difficult for families to navigate and it may demand that children be “bounced around” daily between home, educational site, and child care. At worst, the fragmented system excludes some families, leaving them unable to provide quality early learning experiences for their children. As a result, some five-year-olds arrive at the kindergarten door already seriously behind their peers. In other cases, children eligible for services are separated by disability, the income level of their families, and other definitive qualifications of eligibility.

A community coach can help support the exploration of a more cohesive set of opportunities for young children and families. Coach will guide select communities by acting as an information broker, helping identify resources, offering guidance for a planning process, promoting utilization of new Model Early Learning Standards, and linking programs with similar issues or creative ways to carry out community approaches within their community.

The goal of the community approach for children is to support the early education, care, health, development, and well-being of all young children in the most effective and efficient way. Reaching this goal requires creative thinking, cooperation, and lots of ongoing communication. Community planning groups interested in this approach commonly get started by:

Creating a Vision

- Bringing community stakeholders to the table to learn more about each other as well as the strengths and needs in their community.
- Finding common ground and exploring approaches to share expertise and resources.
- Defining new relationships and approaches to deliver services.
- Keeping the partners at the table without jeopardizing their existence, i.e., child care and private preschools could lose enrollment or close if schools implement four-year-old kindergarten in isolation.

Planning and Decision Making

- Creating a community based collaborative committee structure to make the dreams reality.
- Building consensus on what it takes to move ahead.
- Making formal written plans and interagency agreements.

Building Public Awareness and Community Support

- Gathering information from the community at large to guide the development of the vision.
- Keeping the community informed and involved through planning and implementation.

As communities move into an implementation phase, they begin to address more details in how the new approaches will be designed and carried out including:

Delivery Models and Site Issues

- Approaches can span the entire spectrum from no services, to half day or full day services.
- Sites can be existing programs, creating common early learning centers, or any variety of combinations of merged programs.
- Setting up systems for site selection as the facilities and services of potential participants will vary in quality.

Program Standards

- Merging program philosophies, standards, staff responsibilities, and curricula of several programs is challenging.
- Head Start policies for the number of hours per day and food service are not the same as school district policies.

Personnel and Staffing Patterns

- Creating common professional development opportunities.
- Promoting new roles for staff working in teams.
- Redefining roles for school district staff to deliver services at multiple or off school sites.
- Addressing discrepancies in salaries and benefits.

Transportation

- Public and private funds may be pooled to allow for a smooth transportation system.
- The planning group may need to address parents' concerns about their child riding a school bus: safety, time spent on the bus, or riding with older children.

There is no one "right way" to begin building a community approach to services. Some communities build on previous collaborative efforts; others began anew. One community began by holding community forums to bring issues and concerns around serving four-year-olds immediately to the forefront; another community held planning committee meetings for a year before hosting a community forum. Larger communities often build a broad base of understanding and support by including as many stakeholders as possible beginning with the initial meeting. Smaller communities or those with less-developed networks of child care may begin more informally with discussions among a few early childhood leaders. In this time of shrinking dollars and services it does take the "whole community" to effectively teach children and support families.

Interested in learning more? Coaches can be of help to school personnel, Head Start, child care, Even Start, Family Resource Centers, Public Health, county extension, parent education programs and other community based systems seeking a collaborative approach to serving young children and families. Contact your regional coach for resources and support getting started or for a listening ear if you are rethinking your existing way of serving four year old.

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